

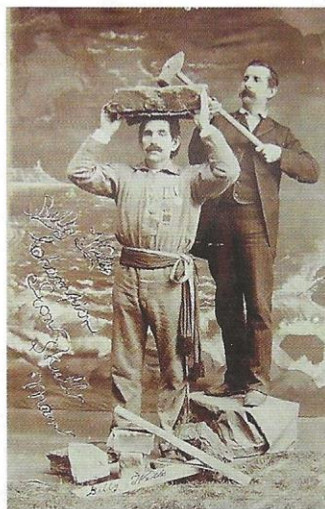
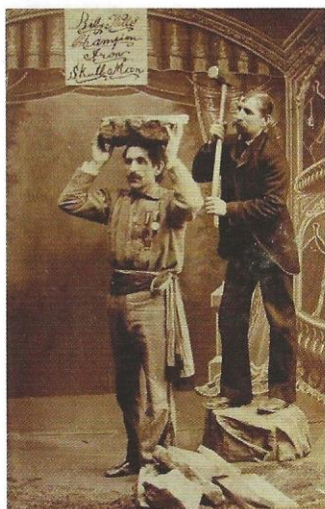
The man with the iron skull

JAN BONDESON finds a new book from the Netherlands offers plenty of fascinating material on some forgotten freaks and prodigies

Over the years, the Dutch nation has had a strong interest in human curiosities. Earlier this year, the journalist Jaco Berveling published the book *De man met de ijzeren schedel* ("The Man with the Iron Skull"), telling the story of five Dutch medical prodigies.

The Man with the Iron Skull of the book's title was a native of Amsterdam named Willem, born in 1848, who emigrated to the United States with his family at the age of 13. He worked as a sailor or a casual labourer and lived in Chicago or San Francisco, under the name of Billy Wells. Apparently, he had always possessed a very thick, hard skull, capable of withstanding a fair amount of punishment. In the early 1890s, he decided to become a professional freak and dime museum performer, having an assistant break large lumps of rock over his head with a sledgehammer. The rock was said to have been specially imported from Belgium – was it particularly porous? It appears that the exact construction of the sledgehammer was never investigated. To vary his monotonous act, Billy had the assistant smash (already sawed through?) planks over his head, or break hickory nuts on it, which he ate himself or gave to his fellow artists.

For quite a few years, Billy managed to support himself as a professional freak performer. A cabinet card of him from the 1890s is sought after by American collectors. In 1904, he met with a calamity when performing at Madison Square Garden: according to the *New York Times*,



In 1904, he met with a calamity at Madison Square Garden

when some brawny young men had been invited to break rocks over his head, one of them had substituted a rock of his own, filled with lead. Billy fell to the ground like a rag doll; fortunately, he survived this cowardly trick to live another day. "Hard-headed Freak's Peril: Rock Smashed in

His Skull had a Lead Filling!" exclaimed the newspaper. According to the unreferenced but normally reliable *Pictorial History of the American Circus*, Billy died in 1910.

Billy Wells can be called a self-made freak: had it not been for his abnormal habit of performing in the dime museums, he could have passed as a normal human being. So could the vaulter and hyperpedestrian Charles Takkenberg (1896-1958), who somersaulted from Amsterdam to Marseille in 1923. However, the other three freakish performers described in Mr Berveling's book had serious bodily infirmities. The

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Two images of Billy Wells and his sledgehammer-wielding assistant in action; the impressively corpulent Egon Cannon; the giant Jan van Albert.

giant Albert Johan Kramer (1897-1976), who called himself Jan van Albert, was 7ft 11in (242cm) tall and toured the United States. The dwarf Gerrit Keizer (1874-1946), also known as Prins Mignon, likewise went to seek his fortune in the dime museums of America. For a student of that Edwardian megastar of corpulence, the Fat Boy of Peckham (see FT325:28-35), it is interesting to note the chapter about his Dutch counterpart, the enormously fat Egon Cannon (born in 1884). Just like the Fat Boy, Cannon was quite a celebrity in his time, touring France and the Low Countries and even visiting Australia in 1913. After the Great War, he sank into obscurity and even the year of his death is not known.

Mr Berveling's book is based on original research and has many curious black and white illustrations, some from the private collection of the Rotterdam endocrinologist Wouter de Herder. It is the most important source about Dutch freakish performers since the 1993 compendium *De Tientoongestelde Mens*. The Dutch were not alone in their fascination with medical marvels: as I have shown in my book *The Lion Boy and other Medical Curiosities*, there was a strong interest in strange performers and human abnormalities throughout Edwardian times, both in the United States and in every part of Europe. *De man met de ijzeren schedel* can be obtained from the publishers (www.uitgeverijderepubliek.nl/) for 17.50 euros.

◆ JAN BONDESON is a retired lecturer and consultant physician at Cardiff University and a regular contributor to FT.